



A BASKET OF LEAVES

99 Books that Capture the Spirit of Africa

Geoff Wisner

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the Spirit of Africa

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2007

Africana
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To my parents, Mary Frances Hatfield
and William Wisner

First published by Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd in 2007

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Auckland Park 2092
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www.jacana.co.za

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ISBN 978-1-77009-206-8

Set in Sabon 10/13pt
Printed by CTP Book Printers, Cape Town
Job No. 000415

See a complete list of Jacana titles at www.jacana.co.za

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Susan Pedersen and Ken Carstens for providing me with a job where I could learn and write about Africa and do my small part to help protect human rights. I am grateful to the Overseas Development Network (now JustAct) for sending me to Zimbabwe, to Tapuwa Chitombo and Millicent Chieza for giving me a home during my six months there, and to Tracey Gwini and Joseph Tasosa for putting me to work at the Department of Natural Resources. Thanks also to Peter Von Doepp for hosting me in Malawi.

I am grateful to Chris Carduff, David Eberly, Steven Riel, and Randi Schalet for their helpful suggestions on the manuscript, and to Emmanuel Dongala, Sindiwe Magona, and M. G. Vassanji for recommending books. Many thanks to Ann Levison of the *Harvard Post* and to Henry Finder and Mike Vazquez of *Transition*, where small portions of this book first appeared. The staff of the Cambridge Public Library, Widener Library, the Boston Athenaeum, the Brooklyn Library, and the New York Public Library were essential in providing many of the books I needed for this project.

Thanks to my agent, Robert Shepard, for his encouragement and work on my behalf. Special thanks to Gabriella Pearce and the late Peter O'Farrell for providing support when it was needed most. I am grateful to the staff of Jacana Media, including Maggie Davey, Russell Clarke, Russell Martin, Kira Schlesinger, and Serusha Govender, and to freelance editor Bronwyn McLennan for making this intercontinental project run smoothly and pleasantly. Most of all, I want to thank my life partner Jenn Brissett for her love, encouragement, and good counsel.

Introduction

I first went to Africa after working several years for the US office of an anti-apartheid organization. I had met South African exiles and edited a newsletter on southern Africa – but going to the region was another matter. My organization was banned, and the authorities in Pretoria prevented me from travelling to Namibia to help monitor elections there. Then came the chance to go to Zimbabwe on a six-month volunteer program. I would live in Harare and work for the Department of Natural Resources, while the others in my group worked for hospitals, women's organizations, and farming cooperatives.

Before I left, I began keeping a list of everything I read about the country – a list that grew with the volumes I found at the British Council Library in Harare and at the leftist bookstore just down the street from Unity Square, where Dambudzo Marechera, a homeless young writer with a hallucinogenic prose style, used to sit and type. Along with histories and political works, I discovered the ghostly novels of Chenjerai Hove, the melancholy realism of Charles Mungoshi, and the unrelenting African stories of Doris Lessing.

Once I'd returned home, my reading list expanded from Zimbabwe to countries elsewhere in the continent. Eventually, I set out to read at least one book about each country in Africa. Including the newly independent country of Eritrea and the struggling-for-independence Western Sahara, and excluding possessions of foreign powers such as Madeira, the Canary Islands, and Réunion, this came to 54 countries.

In some cases, I found, I had covered countries almost without realizing it. Bruce Chatwin's *The Viceroy of Ouidah* describes nineteenth-century Dahomey, now Benin. Ancient Carthage, the scene of Flaubert's *Salammbô*, is in modern-day Tunisia. Other countries were much more difficult. Once I'd scoured the shelves of the library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in search of books on Burkina Faso, Djibouti, and Guinea-Bissau, I began to search their electronic database and to put in requests for titles held by other

Suggestions for further reading

The following is an idiosyncratic list of books that readers interested in particular countries may want to investigate – as well as some exceptional books that deal with more than one African country, or the continent as a whole. They include novels, poetry, plays, histories, academic works, and books of photography.

I've restricted myself to no more than twenty-five titles for one country, and no more than two titles for one author (some of whom are already represented earlier in the book). Don't be upset if your favorite writer isn't here: there are still many authors on Africa that I have yet to read.

Algeria

The Plague – Albert Camus
The Star of Algiers – Aziz Chouaki
The Last Summer of Reason – Tahar Djaout
So Vast the Prison – Assia Djébar
Women of Algiers in Their Apartment – Assia Djébar
Amyntas – André Gide
The Process – Brion Gysin
In the Name of God – Yasmina Khadra
Sahara Unveiled – William Langewiesche
"Exterminate All the Brutes" – Sven Lindqvist
My Battle of Algiers – Ted Morgan
An Algerian Childhood – ed. Leila Sebbar
Nedjma – Kateb Yacine

Angola

Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa – Fred Bridgland
A Lonely Devil – Sousa Jamba
In Search of Enemies – John Stockwell

Benin

Voodoo – Henning Christoph and Hans Oberlander
A Darkening Stain – Robert Wilson

Botswana

A Question of Power – Bessie Head
Mating – Norman Rush
Mortals – Norman Rush
Nisa – Marjorie Shostak

Suggestions for further reading

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency – Alexander McCall Smith
Colour Me Blue – Gaelle Sobott-Mogwe

Burkina Faso

Ritual – Malidoma Patrice Somé

Burundi

The Wild Boy of Burundi – Harlan Lane and Richard Pillard
Burundi: Ethnocide as Discourse and Practice – René Lemarchand
Red Sunset – John Stockwell

Cameroon

Cameroon with Egbert – Dervla Murphy
Houseboy – Ferdinand Oyono

Central African Republic

Batouala – René Maran

Comoros

Human Spirits – Michael Lambek

Congo (Democratic Republic of the)

The Magic Drum – W. F. P. Burton
A Burnt-Out Case – Graham Greene
King Leopold's Ghost – Adam Hochschild
The Poisonwood Bible – Barbara Kingsolver
The Fight – Norman Mailer
Before the Birth of the Moon – V. Y. Mudimbe
In Southern Light – Alex Shoumatoff
The Ponds of Kalambayi – Mike Tidwell
The Forest People – Colin M. Turnbull
In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz – Michela Wrong

Congo (Republic of the)

Little Boys Come from the Stars – Emmanuel Dongala
African Psycho – Alain Mabanckou
Drums Along the Congo – Rory Nugent
Sweet Smell of Mangoes – Sigfrid Soderger

Egypt

Flaubert in Egypt – ed. Francis Steegmüller
I Know Many Songs, But I Cannot Sing – Brian Kiteley
Oleander, Jacaranda – Penelope Lively
Arabian Nights and Days – Naguib Mahfouz
Akhenaten – Naguib Mahfouz
Distant View of a Minaret – Alifa Rifaat
Woman at Point Zero – Nawal El Saadawi

A Basket of Leaves

Ethiopia

Remote People – Evelyn Waugh

Gabon

One Dry Season – Caroline Alexander

The Rainbird – Jan Brokken

Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa – Paul B. du Chaillu

Days with Albert Schweitzer – Frederick Franck

On the Edge of the Primeval Forest – Albert Schweitzer

Ghana

Changes – Ama Ata Aidoo

Our Sister Killjoy – Ama Ata Aidoo

The Prophet of Zongo Street – Mohammed Naseehu Ali

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born – Ayi Kwei Armah

Two Thousand Seasons – Ayi Kwei Armah

Beyond the Horizon – Amma Darko

The Clothes of Nakedness – Benjamin Kwakye

The Narrow Path – Francis Selormey

Black Power – Richard Wright

Guinea

In Search of Africa – Manthia Diawara

We Won't Budge – Manthia Diawara

Guinea-Bissau

Armed Struggle in Africa – Gérard Chaliand

Fighting Two Colonialisms – Stephanie Urdang

Ivory Coast

Nine Hills to Nambonkaha – Sarah Erdman

Finding the Center – V. S. Naipaul

As the Crow Flies – Veronique Tadjo

Kenya

Maasai Days – Cheryl Bentsen

The Adventures and Misadventures of Peter Beard in Africa –
Jon Bowermaster

Out of Africa – Isak Dinesen

The Winds of Mara – Colin Fletcher

Green Hills of Africa – Ernest Hemingway

True at First Light – Ernest Hemingway

Unbowed – Wangari Maathai

West with the Night – Beryl Markham

Kill Me Quick – Meja Mwangi

Petals of Blood – Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Suggestions for further reading

The River Between – Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

The Lives of Beryl Markham – Errol Trzebinski

Lesotho

Basali! – ed. K. Limakatso Kendall

She Plays with the Darkness – Zakes Mda

Liberia

The Darling – Russell Banks

New Song in a Strange Land – Esther Warner

The Big Killing – Robert Wilson

Beyond the Mango Tree – Amy Bronwen Zemser

Libya

In the Country of Men – Hisham Matar

Libya: The Struggle for Survival – Geoff Simons

Tripoli the Mysterious – Mabel Loomis Todd

Madagascar

Madagascar – Gian Paolo Barbieri

The Aye-Aye and I – Gerald Durrell

Muddling Through in Madagascar – Dervla Murphy

The Great Red Island – Arthur Stratton

Malawi

Napolo and the Python – Steve Chimombo

Sugarcane with Salt – James Ng'ombe

Banda – Philip Short

My Secret History – Paul Theroux

My Other Life – Paul Theroux

Mali

In Griot Time – Banning Eyre

Sundiata – D. T. Niane

Bound to Violence – Yambo Ouologuem

The Cruellest Journey – Kira Salak

The Unveiling of Timbuctoo – Galbraith Welch

Mauritania

Silent Terror – Samuel Cotton

Mauritius

The Rape of Sita – Lindsey Collen

The Overcrowded Barracoon – V. S. Naipaul

The Mauritius Command – Patrick O'Brian

Morocco

A Hundred Camels in the Courtyard – Paul Bowles
Points in Time – Paul Bowles
The Voices of Marrakesh – Elias Canetti
For Bread Alone – Mohamed Choukri
Jean Genet in Tangier – Mohamed Choukri
A Street in Marrakech – Elizabeth Warnock Fernea
The Sacred Night – Tahar ben Jelloun
This Blinding Absence of Light – Tahar ben Jelloun
The Lemon – Mohammed Mrabet
An Invisible Spectator – Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno
In Morocco – Edith Wharton

Mozambique

Every Man Is a Race – Mia Couto
Under the Frangipani – Mia Couto
A Complicated War – William Finnegan
We Killed Mangy-Dog – Luis Bernardo Honwana
A Shattering of Silence – Farida Karodia
Running to Maputo – Albie Sachs

Namibia

Namibia: The Struggle for Liberation – Alfred Moleah
Never Follow the Wolf – Helao Shityuwete
Morenga – Uwe Timm

Niger

Riding the Demon – Peter Chilson
Still Waters in Niger – Kathleen Hill

Nigeria

Anthills of the Savannah – Chinua Achebe
A Man of the People – Chinua Achebe
Purple Hibiscus – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
The Legend of the Rockhills – Funso Aiyejina
Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes – Harold Courlander
The Joys of Motherhood – Buchi Emecheta
The Interesting Narrative – Olaudah Equiano
Forest of a Thousand Daemons – D. O. Fagunwa
Beasts of No Nation – Uzodinma Iweala
Abiku – Debo Kotun
The Way of the Orisa – Philip John Neimark
This Is Lagos – Flora Nwapa
The Voice – Gabriel Okara
The Famished Road – Ben Okri

Songs of Enchantment – Ben Okri
The Icarus Girl – Helen Oyeyemi
Sozaboy – Ken Saro-Wiwa
Mandela's Earth – Wole Soyinka
Ibadan – Wole Soyinka
Feather Woman of the Jungle – Amos Tutuola

Rwanda

Machete Season – Jean Hatzfeld
Season of Blood – Fergal Keane

São Tomé and Príncipe

A History of São Tomé Island 1470–1655 – Robert Garfield
São Tome and Príncipe: From Plantation Colony to Microstate – Tony Hodges and Malyn Newitt

Senegal

The Beggars' Strike – Aminata Sow Fall
Moustapha's Eclipse – Reginald McKnight
He Sleeps – Reginald McKnight
Senegal – Akihiro Yamamura

Seychelles

The Seychelles Affair – Mike Hoare
Paradise Raped – James R. Mancham

Sierra Leone

In the Land of Magic Soldiers – Daniel Bergner
Blood Diamonds – Greg Campbell
The Heart of the Matter – Graham Greene

Somalia

Black Hawk Down – Mark Bowden
Desert Flower – Waris Dirie
Gifts – Nuruddin Farah
Maps – Nuruddin Farah
The Road to Hell – Michael Maren

South Africa

The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist – Breyten Breytenbach
A Chain of Voices – André Brink
A Simple Lust – Dennis Brutus
Burger's Daughter – Nadine Gordimer
Waiting for the Barbarians – J. M. Coetzee
Disgrace – J. M. Coetzee
Kafka's Curse – Achmat Dangor
Master Harold ... and the boys – Athol Fugard

The Lava of This Land – ed. Denis Hirson
Heshel's Kingdom – Dan Jacobson
Country of My Skull – Antjie Krog
Time of the Butcherbird – Alex La Guma
Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night – Sindiwe Magona
My Traitor's Heart – Rian Malan
Ways of Dying – Zakes Mda
Down Second Avenue – Ezekiel Mphahlele
Island in Chains – Indres Naidoo
Fools – Njabulo Ndebele
Cry, the Beloved Country – Alan Paton
And Night Fell – Molefe Pheto
To Every Birth Its Blood – Mongane Serote
Red Dust – Gillian Slovo
You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town – Zoë Wicomb
Biko – Donald Woods

Sudan

The River War – Winston Churchill
What Is the What – Dave Eggers
Wings of Dust – Jamal Mahjoub
Darfur Diaries – Jen Marlowe with Aisha Bain and Adam Shapiro
The Last of the Nuba – Leni Riefenstahl
Behind the Red Line – Jemera Rone

Tanzania

The Lake Regions of Central Africa – Richard F. Burton
The Whales in Lake Tanganyika – Lennart Hagerfors
Sand Rivers – Peter Matthiessen
How I Found Livingstone – H. M. Stanley
Antonia Saw the Oryx First – Maria Thomas
The Book of Secrets – M. G. Vassanji

Tunisia

Salammbô – Gustave Flaubert

Uganda

Elizabeth of Toro – Elizabeth Nyabongo
The Mountain People – Colin M. Turnbull
Kahawa – Donald E. Westlake

Western Sahara

Skeletons on the Zahara – Dean King

Zambia

Zambia Shall Be Free – Kenneth Kaunda
Chirundu – Es'kia Mphahlele

Zimbabwe

The Matabele Campaign – R. S. S. Baden-Powell
The Soul of Mbira – Paul F. Berliner
Harvest of Thorns – Shimmer Chinodya
Nervous Conditions – Tsitsi Dangarembga
Rooms in the House of Stone – Michael Dorris
None But Ourselves – Julie Frederikse
Mukiwa – Peter Godwin
Bones – Chenjerai Hove
Shadows – Chenjerai Hove
Son of the Soil – Wilson Katiyo
Guns and Rain – David Lan
African Stories – Doris Lessing
The Grass Is Singing – Doris Lessing
Of Spirits and Madness – Paul R. Linde
Zenzele – J. Nozipo Maraire
House of Hunger – Dambudzo Marechera
Mindblast – Dambudzo Marechera
The Chitepo Assassination – David Martin and Phyllis Johnson
The Struggle for Zimbabwe – David Martin and Phyllis Johnson
Silent Journey from the East – I. V. Mazorodze
Our Votes, Our Guns – Martin Meredith
The Setting Sun and the Rolling World – Charles Mungoshi
Nkomo: The Story of My Life – Joshua Nkomo
An Ill-Fated People – Lawrence Vambe
From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe – Lawrence Vambe
Butterfly Burning – Yvonne Vera

Various Countries

Fiction

Alphabetical Africa – Walter Abish
The Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories –
 ed. Chinua Achebe and C. L. Innes
A Good Man in Africa – William Boyd
Brazzaville Beach – William Boyd
Water Music – T. Coraghessan Boyle
The Small Bees' Honey – George Clark
From Africa – ed. Adele King
Under African Skies – ed. Charles R. Larson
Looking for a Rain God – ed. Nadezda Obradovic
African Rhapsody – ed. Nadezda Obradovic
Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage – Maria Thomas
African Visas – Maria Thomas

Sacred Hunger – Barry Unsworth
Jacob's Ladder – John A. Williams

Non-Fiction

In My Father's House – Anthony Appiah
Africa Betrayed – George B. N. Ayittey
Africa in Chaos – George B. N. Ayittey
French Lessons in Africa – Peter Biddlecombe
Blood on the Tracks – Miles Bredin
Wanderings in West Africa – Richard F. Burton
A Slaver's Log Book – Theophilus Conneau
High Noon in Southern Africa – Chester Crocker
The Black Man's Burden – Basil Davidson
The African Slave Trade – Basil Davidson
The Journey Is the Destination: The Journals of Dan Eldon –
ed. Kathy Eldon
Travels in the Congo – André Gide
The Strong Brown God – Sanche de Gramont
Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent – Blaine Harden
The Fate of Africa – Jeremy Harding
The Exploration of Africa – Anne Hugon
The Electronic Elephant – Dan Jacobson
The Soccer War – Ryszard Kapuscinski
The Race to Fashoda – David Levering Lewis
Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa –
David Livingstone
African Silences – Peter Matthiessen
The Tree Where Man Was Born – Peter Matthiessen
The Ukimwi Road – Dervla Murphy
The Scramble for Africa – Thomas Pakenham
Travels in the Interior of Africa – Mungo Park
African Saints – Frederick Quinn
Africa: A Biography of the Continent – John Reader
The Voyage of the Mir-El-Lah – Lorenzo Ricciardi
Out of Africa – Keith B. Richburg
African Madness – Alex Shoumatoff

Imaginary Countries
Henderson the Rain King – Saul Bellow
Mandoa, Mandoa! – Winifred Holtby
The Coup – John Updike
Black Mischief – Evelyn Waugh

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